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ABSTRACT

One teacher's experiences teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to adults in community-based programs are drawn upon to illustrate how ESL syllabus design can better reflect the conditions that attract students to community agencies, and how the agencies can better serve students uninterested in or disadvantaged by formal educational institutions. The approach integrates critical perspectives on identity, social justice, and active citizenship with more traditional ESL concerns such as grammar, pronunciation, and second language literacy. It is suggested that under certain conditions, transformative or emancipatory practices can result when educators challenge received wisdom in areas of the syllabus not usually associated with critical theory. Three examples are offered from the author's classroom experience: discussion of principles underlying an upcoming referendum; student assessment that focuses on language awareness and media literacy; and conducting classroom research in the ESL context. (Contains 11 references.) (MSE)

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Critical Perspectives in Community-Based, Adult ESL Programs

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For the past eight years I have worked as a teacher, teacher-trainer, and curriculum consultant for adult ESL programs that take place in informal learning environments such as community agencies, religious centers and work sites. In these types of programs, social needs are often as important as language needs in terms of attracting ESL students to the agencies. In the Chinese community center where I teach, many newcomers come to receive advice (in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English) about immigration, housing, health care and employment possibilities. Seniors' programs and a women's support group are also popular. And every spring, our center overflows with people seeking help with their tax forms. Strong identification with the agency and close friendships strengthened through shared experiences of identity have been fundamental to the continued survival of our program and others like it.

Through my work, I have been examining how ESL syllabus design can better reflect the conditions that attract students to community agencies, and conversely, how we can better serve students uninterested in or disadvantaged by formal educational institutions. I call this approach a *community-based ESL pedagogy*. In this approach, I've tried to make the selection of language materials and methods directly responsive to the specific social contexts and real local issues where language instruction takes place.

And in my writing, I've tried to demonstrate how critical perspectives around identity, social justice and active citizenship can be integrated along with more traditional ESL concerns such as grammar, pronunciation, and second language literacy (see Morgan 1992/1993; 1997b; 1998).

So what does it mean to take up a critical perspective in a community-based pedagogy? I believe it means cultivating a rigorous skepticism towards any top-down, "one size fits all" orientation towards research and theory, even of the critical variety. Mastery of a particular theory, in and of itself, does not necessarily warrant serious consideration from one's colleagues and ESL practitioners in general. My own experiences of trying to work through various critical, postmodern, and feminist discourses, lead me to suggest that if these conceptual models are to be taken up seriously and substantively in the field of ESL, then they need to be made plausible within ESL's existing constructs, priorities, and terms of reference. The benefits from such an approach can be mutual. Through closer attention to core ESL concerns (e.g. pedagogical grammars, L2 literacy, SLA, etc.), we may contribute unique pedagogical insights and classroom experiences of language and power that further the emancipatory goals to which current critical theories aspire.

Based on such concerns, I have focused on making critical teaching more of a contingent or contextualized form of pedagogy. To this end, I try not to presume which practices are neutral and which ones are empowering for a specific group of students. On occasion, my students rely upon traditional language learning strategies that

some would consider parochial or inhibitive in terms of conventional SLA theory. Nonetheless, these same "traditional" practices have at times been effective in challenging the ways social power relations are experienced at the local, community level. So, for instance, while unrestrained use of bilingual dictionaries might been seen as inhibiting depth of L2 vocabulary acquisition (see Oxford & Crookall, 1990; Zimmerman, 1997), I have witnessed lessons in which "close" attention and negotiation of words in L1 and L2 have generated ideological understandings of texts that would elude most native speakers. The key point from such examples is that under certain conditions, transformative or emancipatory practices can result when we challenge received wisdom in areas of the syllabus not usually associated with critical theory.

Let me now provide three short examples that develop this point further. The first looks more closely at the potential uses of bilingualism and biliteracy in the ESL classroom. In my own program, most of the students share a common first language (i.e. Cantonese). Instead of discouraging its use, something I would have done a few years ago, I now try to integrate students' first language and textual practices throughout my lessons. In one regard, it has helped the lower level students keep up, which is important in community programs that have continuous intake and mixed streams as a result. But there have been other important developments as well. One example that stands out in my mind revolved around the 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty. One of the key issues surrounding the referendum was the actual meaning of the referendum question: Did it imply a renegotiation of the existing

federal structure? Or did it mean a vote for independence, a clean break from Canada? In our class, we explored these ambiguities through a combination of first and second language texts and speaking activities. For many students, bilingualism in the classroom helped them recognize that confusion and ambiguity are not necessarily a result of their limitations as second language learners. Instead, through bilingual knowledge students recognized that indeterminate meanings can be an *intention* of language users and one intimately connected to issues of social power (see Morgan 1997a, 1997/1998). For these students, increased critical language awareness in both L1 and L2 was promoted through bilingual practices in the ESL classroom. Such activities are invaluable in terms of promotimg critical and active citizenship skills that go beyond the rote learning of isolated dates and heroic individuals.

The area of assessment, is the second example. Our profession has been somewhat preoccupied with marking out and measuring discrete elements of language, often solely for the purposes of comparing and ranking learners more easily. But many students come to community-based programs to seek refuge from these types of activities, and I have tried to examine how assessment might better reflect their interests. One aspect I have looked at and written about is the use of assessment in terms of developing critical language awareness and media literacy (Morgan, 1995/1996). What assessment tools could we develop to facilitate an emerging awareness of ideology, language and social power in our lessons, or an awareness of how texts privilege the interests of certain communities over others? I believe there is a lot more that could be

done in this direction. If we are concerned about community advocacy and leadership, we should look at how assessment tools might help students participate more effectively in their new political culture.

The third example is the area of teacher research. If we are to develop teaching practices that are responsive to local needs, we must have some procedures with which to identify what these needs are. Qualitative approaches such as action research and classroom ethnography are quite useful in this regard. However, what is problematic and difficult to know are the meanings that sustained observation and documentation evoke in ESL students, some of whom come from societies where classroom research methods can inadvertently parallel forms of political surveillance. In my class, some have said they are scared of what a politically-sensitive comment might mean for family and friends back home. Others worry about the permanence of their legal status. And still others have been suspicious of the fundamental assumptions that motivate inquiry. Given these concerns, I have tried to be more cautious in my own work. In collecting data for my thesis, or for an article I'm working on, I try to identify specific moments, contexts and issues when it is neither possible nor desirable to know the inner or "emic" thoughts and motivations of my students (see Morgan, 1997b). The political and ethical dimensions of classroom research strike me as a particularly underexamined aspect of ESL pedagogy. This is especially problematic given our current interest in language and identity issues in ESL (see Peirce, 1995) and the potentially disruptive pressures that such research poses for established

patterns of communication and power relations in local community life. As inquiry into the social and ideological factors that shape language learning expands, we may "discover" that many generalized assumptions and procedures around classroom research may need to contract as a result.

In the areas I have discussed above, bilingualism, assessment and research, I've tried to show that a critical perspective need not be intellectually abstract nor should it be seen as a peripheral skill, superficially examined at the end of the day. Rather, it is a way of seeing and doing that can be made applicable to all aspects of our work. It is a way of looking at everyday, common activities, in uncommon ways. It means examining ESL theories and methods assumed to be neutral, scientific, or pragmatic, and to see them in ideological terms (Benesch, 1994); that is, ways of knowing that *deny* as well as provide opportunities for individuals and communities.

As Jim Cummins (1996) has recently advocated, the challenge for ESL teachers is to recognize that classroom microinteractions both consciously and unconsciously define what is socially desirable and possible for students. In Cummins words, our pedagogical choices invariably contribute to either *collaborative* or *coercive* relations of power beyond the classroom. If, for example, we ignore issues around identity such as anti-racism, women's rights, sexual orientation, or employment equity, we risk implying that these are irrelevant in our society. Similarly, if we choose not to examine how discriminatory practices are structured through language, we risk implying that such practices cannot be challenged. For these reasons, I believe we might define ourselves as critical educators by the way

our lessons explore dominant language practices and challenge inequitable relations of power beyond the school.

Having said that, I don't want to underestimate the difficulties involved. There are many subtle, and not so subtle, institutional pressures that limit the parameters of critical work. Indeed, in community programs, such pressures appear overwhelming for the future. In Toronto, our programs are threatened by the past election of a corporatist government which has promised sizable tax reductions and now cuts social services to fulfill them. In keeping with the government's values, a kind of rough Social Darwinism can be seen working its way through the adult ESL system. Higher attendance thresholds are now enforced. Surviving providers of settlement services actively and intensely compete for students. Inside the classroom, anxious teachers favour students whose long term attendance is more assured. And for everyone involved, there is considerable apprehension about the governments' calls for measurable outcomes, increased standardization and accountability from providers.

How will critical ESL pedagogy be defined in this environment? Will it be defined as a means by which standards and outcomes are more efficiently met? Will it be reduced to a method divorced from any political or transformative philosophy? Or will it be defined simply as a choice amongst many, rather than an essential part of all choices? Time will tell. But one thing is for certain, TESOL, through its influential activities and publications, will have a significant role to play in either defending or challenging these developments

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